

# EPA finds poisonous lead at playground by old smelter

Alison Young, USA TODAY 7:31 p.m. EST February 15, 2013

EPA tests show the soil in a grassy New Jersey playground area contained as much as 15 times the amount of lead the agency considers hazardous for children's play areas.



(Photo: Eileen Blass, USA TODAY)

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(<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http://usat.ly/VZOpNh&text=EPA%20finds%20poisonous%20lead%20at%20playground%20by%20old%20smelter%20site>)

The Environmental Protection Agency has found dangerous levels of lead contamination in the soil at a Newark public housing playground next to an old smelter site regulators previously said needed no further investigation. The EPA is recommending access be restricted to the play area, [records show](http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/604197-site-11a-barth-sampling-update-february-2013.html) (<http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/604197-site-11a-barth-sampling-update-february-2013.html>).

Test results released Friday by the EPA show the [soil in the grassy playground area](http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/604200-site-11a-barthsmelting-epa-test-results-0-1-inch.html#document/p1/a92212) (<http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/604200-site-11a-barthsmelting-epa-test-results-0-1-inch.html#document/p1/a92212>) contained as much as 6,000 parts per million of lead — 15 times the amount the agency considers hazardous for children's play areas.

The EPA tested the playground only after USA TODAY raised questions last fall about why the EPA had signed off on the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's [conclusion that no further investigation](http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/414673-site-11a-barth-smelting-chapel-st-pre-cerclis.html) (<http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/414673-site-11a-barth-smelting-chapel-st-pre-cerclis.html>) was necessary at the site. The agencies had reached that conclusion as part of a national reassessment of old smelter sites in response to USA TODAY's "Ghost Factories" investigation (<http://ghostfactories.usatoday.com>). The series of articles has revealed widespread government failures to investigate the dangers left behind in soil by lead manufacturing plants that operated in the decades before environmental regulations. It has prompted soil testing and cleanups at several locations across the country.

In September, [USA TODAY examined](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/11/15/epa-new-jersey-lead-soil/1414681/) (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/11/15/epa-new-jersey-lead-soil/1414681/>) the government re-assessments done of the old factory sites in New Jersey and found regulators had closed the books on several without doing any soil testing — despite their close proximity to residential areas where children live and play. Lead exposure is particularly dangerous for children, whose developing brains can be irreparably harmed when they ingest even tiny amounts of lead dust by putting dirty hands or toys in their mouths.

The playground at the Newark Housing Authority's Terrell Homes is just across the property line from the former site of Barth Smelting, which operated from at least 1946 to about 1982, records show.



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In September the EPA issued a statement saying it would test the soil at the public housing complex "as a precaution" even though it "has no reason to believe at this time" that Barth Smelting has contaminated the grounds.

EPA officials did not immediately respond to questions Friday about whether federal and state environmental regulators erred in not fully investigating the playground earlier.

The Barth Smelting site, at 99 Chapel St. in Newark, had additional historical potential to have contaminated the surrounding area, USA TODAY previously reported. An old fire insurance map shows the site had also been used by another company that had made lead batteries there. The factory property is now occupied by another business, and most of the property is covered with paving or a building, capping any potentially contaminated soil.

Terrell Homes, a 275-unit family complex built in 1946, is next to the former factory site. Private homes are across the street. Records released by the EPA on Friday show the agency also tested the backyards of two private homes along Chapel St., and both had lead contamination above the EPA's hazard standard. The EPA said it will be doing additional soil sampling and will hold a neighborhood meeting in the coming weeks.

Keith Kinard, executive director of the Newark Housing Authority, which operates Terrell Homes, said he had just received the test results from the EPA on Friday afternoon and is reviewing them to determine what needed to be done, including whether the playground needs to be closed. "This is something we take very seriously. Whatever we have to do we are going to do," he said.

New Jersey DEP officials, who wrote a report last year saying no further investigation was recommended, did not respond to USA TODAY's questions about whether they erred in their conclusion. New Jersey DEP spokesman Larry Hajna said in an e-mail: "The DEP worked closely with EPA in a thorough and cooperative investigation of these sites, and has provided the federal agency with detailed results of our work. As we have stated previously, it is appropriate for EPA to explore this issue. We will continue to work with the agency to provide any information it may need.

As of Friday afternoon, residents of the Terrell Homes remained unaware of the danger, and children were still playing in the contaminated area, said the Rev. Fletcher Harper, executive director of GreenFaith, a New Jersey environmental justice organization that followed up with local community leaders after USA TODAY shared the EPA's test results.

"Kids at Terrell Homes, and lots of other communities of color and poor communities, are getting exposed to toxins at a dangerous level," he said. "They deserve a clean, healthy environment. And they deserve regulators who aren't afraid to hold polluters accountable." Harper has served on the New Jersey DEP's environmental justice advisory council, which seeks to ensure residents are equally protected from pollution regardless of race or income.

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